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The Mystery of Pain

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THE MYSTERY OF PAIN

One great mystery which confronts all men, as they contemplate this universe, is the mystery of pain. The problem is universal in its extent, for although there are the very few who claim never to have known a moment of sickness, the natural processes of their existence are inevitably accompanied by physical suffering in a greater or less degree, and pain is claiming its own among those with whom they come in daily contact, while the greater number of them have felt its iron hand upon themselves. Naturally an explanation is demanded. The eternal "why" rises from millions of hearts, who can not follow Leibnitz in his theory of the best possible world, or Malebranche when he asserts that it is the best conceivable.

Nor on the other hand are certain of the great religions much more satisfactory. In the Buddhist doctrine that pain is caused by desire there is no real contribution to thought, for it is not explained why desire should bring suffering, or why natural longings should be in themselves evil. The theory that present pain is the result of evil actions in a former existence would have some value if we could follow the generally accepted interpretation of the doctrine of transmigration of souls. Then, when we did not find present pain to be in any way commensurate with present sin, we could go back to a former existence to discover the cause. But unfortunately the generally accepted interpretation of Buddhist thought has been shown by Mr. Rhys Davids to be incorrect. It is not the soul, the entity, the personality which passes from one state of existence to the next, but the "karma"; that is, the result of a being's mental and bodily actions. Hence this explanation of the presence of pain is unmoral, since the punishment is in no way related to personality. The punishment of a collection of unfortunate results is not the punishment of the sinner.

In Zoroaster's solution we find the difficulty as great. Ahri-man is not the Satan of Milton, a created spirit who chooses of his own free will to be evil, after he has lived for æons in the heavenly court, but a spirit coeval with Ormuzd the good, of apparently equal power and authority. Ormuzd is to triumph

at last, but this fact does not remove the difficulty of reconciling this belief with the conception of a moral relationship between the universe and man. As Bruce points out so admirably in *The Moral Order*, one owes his allegiance no more to Ormuzd than to Ahriman.

As for the ancient Hebrew doctrine, the statement of which is most familiar to us in the philosophy of Job's comfortless comforters, Job is afflicted with a sore disease; disease and pain are penalties for sin; therefore Job must be a prodigious sinner. This line of reasoning is unanswerable, if the premises, which form an integral part of early Hebrew thought, are correct. Pain is a penalty; in a sense it is for the purpose of reclaiming the sinner: but this side of the doctrine is of rather late development, applied by the prophets to national rather than to individual problems. In earlier times pain is regarded as almost entirely punitive—a fact shown clearly by the story of the destruction of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, who went down into the pit where real life, and therefore real chance for change and repentance, was ended forever. We may safely assert that this doctrine of pain as a punishment inflicted in this world for each definite sin arose in the feeling for the necessity for retribution, that its occurrence must take place here and now, for hereafter,—why, there is no hereafter; Sheol is not hell, but a state of quiescence “where all things are forgotten.” The book of Job was written for the express purpose of refuting this line of reasoning. Job himself in all probability would have agreed with his friends at a former time, but now he feels pain himself. Loss, bereavement, anguish, touch him to the quick, and this same deep and bitter personal experience lifts the scales from his eyes. He is conscious of no great sin which could have caused such punishment, and so to his mind his pain can not be a direct penalty. This story of Job, however, whether it be regarded as history, or as a great poem without foundation in fact, must be considered as representing not merely the experience of one man, but as expressing a growing consciousness borne out by a vast human testimony based upon personal experience. And yet as late as the Persian period it was necessary to re-establish this truth. The people saw that the good were suffering, the evil in prosperity. The author of Ecclesiastes steps forward to vindicate the moral order; and this vindication he accomplishes by showing that the material things of life do not constitute reality. They

are but "vanity"; while real life, the life which counts, the life in which satisfaction may be attained, is the life of the spirit.

The presence of demons is still another explanation for the presence of suffering. We find this answer suggested in the Old Testament, but more clearly stated in the New. Jesus himself apparently connects sickness with the activity of unclean spirits in many cases, but not in all. This fact is very significant, for it may suggest a possible interpretation of his words in reference to them. What is the unclean spirit? Does it not belong to the stricken man himself? In the words of Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*:

"How can men say that spectres haunt 'em?
The mind, does it not make the phantom?"

As to diseases not in any way connected with the presence of unclean spirits, Jesus is most emphatic in denying their direct connection with sin. Neither did the poor boy nor his parents sin that he was born blind. The people whose blood Pilate mingled with sacrifices are not sinners above all the Galileans, nor are those upon whom the tower of Siloam fell to be condemned above all. In the consciousness and experience of the human race, in the testimony of the mind of Jesus there rests no proof that pain is a definite penalty upon a sinful individual.

In short the fact is, in the great world religions, in primitive belief, in early Hebrew thought, in demonology, in Babylonian, Greek, and Egyptian myth, there is felt to be some connection between sin and pain. Human consciousness in all ages, among all races, clearly testifies to an unformed and undefined belief that because of moral imperfection in the world, physical imperfection is in some way the inevitable result, and that when moral imperfection shall pass away, pain shall also depart and all the world will be right. A vital connection is inevitably established between sin and pain; but the connection is not immediate but remote.

Each day of our world's growth is bearing in upon human discovery the vital connection between mind and matter. The organist strikes the note upon the keyboard, sound vibrations are started within the pipe which travel to the ear, causing the drum to vibrate. This single statement is a complete descrip-

tion of what happens as far as the physical process is concerned. To know even that there is a "sound," to determine what kind of a sound it is, to relate it to others, the higher intellectual faculties of perception, memory, and the like must operate. Again, in order to appreciate that music, the æsthetic sensibilities must be cultivated. But on the other hand, if the ear is destroyed the mind cannot perceive the sound thus unaided by material activities. Further, the body bears within itself the marks of mental states. In fear the mouth becomes dry, the pupils of the eye dilate to a prodigious extent, the hands are automatically clasped or raised above the head. In sorrow the breathing is heavy and laboured, while in joy it is quick and sharp. The remark has been made that all Christians are "good looking," not that they all conform to the general standards of artistic beauty, but that in some way the inner peace and holiness is physically manifest in a certain light of expression which dominates the entire man. In the same way the connection is true of an evil character. He may be extremely handsome, he may look guileless and innocent; but a clever student of human nature can almost invariably detect the underlying slyness or evil intent.

From these considerations it would seem only a natural deduction to assert that the connection between pain and sin is a real one; that the painful, therefore, ought to accompany each individual life which transgresses the moral law. And yet there is an objection to this deduction—an objection which vanishes only when we inquire, what is the real relationship between an individual man and the others of this world? The architect designs his building. If he is a man of taste, of experience, one who has studied and laboured to perfect his understanding in matters of acoustics, proportion, and finish, provided he then puts his best self into his work, he will give to the world a substantive influence which will exert a profound, lasting, uplifting effect upon all who come within its view. If, on the other hand, the architect be of meagrely appreciative capacity, or poorly trained, he will produce a nonentity or a monstrosity which will make the cultivated turn away their heads and augment the poor taste already existing in the community.

In the same way, the work of his mind is not limited to the narrow walls of his own Ego. In a very real sense we are composite beings. Each one of us is part father, part mother, part

brother, part friend. Each one with whom we come in contact makes his contribution, which we take to ourselves, make our very own, without losing one atom of individuality, for these same contributions are not received as so many beans into a bag, but rather as water into sand, permeating the whole; or better, as two chemical substances which, occurring together, form a new combination of molecules. Of course such a figure is very inadequate, as any figure of matter for spirit needs must be, but perhaps it may serve to point out the fact that spirits, minds, souls, though on the one hand distinct and separate, are, on the other, closely related in their mutual influence.

Again, in the matter of health and sickness the power of suggestion is manifest. Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes has said that commercially estimated a smile may be worth five thousand dollars to a physician. Encouragement, hopefulness, may help to turn the tide from death to life while depression and worry about a sick-bed will inevitably augment the power of disease and diminish the chance of recovery.

Furthermore, we have no way of estimating the extent of conscious and unconscious mental influence. The thoughts start within the self, but whither do they tend and where is the stopping point? Do they find their effect to be potent only upon those with whom one comes in daily and intimate contact, or do they perhaps go beyond the bounds of our own social circle, not merely through their transmission from one to the other, but as actually travelling through a spiritual medium as the wind takes its course through space, "The wind bloweth where it listeth . . . so is every one who is born of the spirit." Modern investigations seem to declare without a doubt that these questions are to be answered in the affirmative; and if we can so answer them, we shall find ourselves in possession of facts which will make clear much of the world now hidden and clouded in darkness.

If there is, then, a common world soul and a common world life, it is evident that all nature must bear within itself the mark of world character. When we look about or upon the physical world all we see which is beautiful, good, pure, elevating, is the sign of goodness; it is the natural accompaniment of God. We all need pictures, we all need to be taught as children. Our whole understanding of the spiritual life depends upon our analogies drawn from the world of matter. God to the little

child is so real, so concrete, so definite that in this childish fancy he would call up before his eye of imagination a picture of God in some human semblance. Beauty must be seen or heard, love must be felt, before we can in any way realise the essential weaving of those deepest of all spiritual facts. Thus, to look at the darker side of the picture, to know the darkness of sin, it must in some way be impressed upon the human race in such a way that its heavy hand is felt and its darkness seen. Pain tells men that all the world is *not* right, in spite of Browning, a teaching which is particularly impressive upon those whose development has not reached a point where they can see the truth in any way but by a sight with the physical eyes of the body.

But why then does this rod not strike upon the evil alone? It is part of the great law of vicarious sacrifice. The good ever bear the moral burden of the world's sin; working, striving, hoping, sacrificing self, all, for the sake of lifting that burden of sin, are also bearing the marks of that sin in themselves. They are the voices crying in the wilderness, they are bearers of the gospel to their fellows, who cry to the world: "O world, burdened with sin which ye do not realise, which ye count as of little moment, see what that sin is which has stamped upon the human race its indelible mark, indelible until the whole law shall be kept, until goodness reigns supreme, and the inevitable result, happiness, peace, rest, shall pervade the universe."

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